

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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McBee-Black, Kerri; Kabel, Allison; and Ha-Brookshire, Jung, "Barriers to Independent Living: Unmet Apparel Needs for People Living with Disabilities" (2017). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 159.

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Barriers to Independent Living: Unmet Apparel Needs for People Living with Disabilities

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Keywords: Disability, social model of disability, apparel

People living with a disability (PLWD) struggle to find apparel that fits their needs and the appropriateness of the activities they wish to engage. These unmet apparel needs create barriers to social participation, and also extend into areas that impact educational and employment opportunities affecting their quality of life (Corrigan, Larson, & Rusch, 2009; Kabel, McBee-Black, & Dimka, 2016). Wingate, Kaiser, & Freeman (1985) suggest that lack of appropriate apparel can make PLWD feel isolated, and Lamb (2001) argued that more research is needed to investigate the barriers that exist for PLWD and the extent to which apparel contributes to social exclusion.

The social model of disability posits that disabilities are social problems, not the impairment, created and intensified by environmental and attitudinal barriers in society (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). This model is different from the medical model of disability which focuses on the physiological issues of the disability (Areheart, 2008). In this light, the medical model suggests that the built environment improves the ability of PLWD to live independently and participate in desired activities (Clarke & George, 2005). However, whether meeting the apparel needs of PLWD can lead to similar outcomes is unknown, creating a large gap in our understanding of the effectiveness of the social model of disability. Consequently, a qualitative study was designed to explore the unmet apparel needs of PLWD under the social model of disability framework.

The data were collected via focus group interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Focus group interviewing is useful as it provides a collective voice to marginalized participants (Liamputtong, 2011). Seven focus groups were held at a Midwestern University over a one-year period. Cognitively-intact, English-speaking, adult PLWD, trained health care professionals who work with PLWD, and individuals who have a loved one with a disability were recruited for this study because they have intimate and inner knowledge about PLWD. A convenience sample of 20 participants (18 females and 2 males) completed the interviews, with no drop-outs. The sample included eight PLWD, seven parents or caregivers of PLWD, and five health care professionals working with PLWD. Participants were asked to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with their apparel-related challenges. The focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Two major themes emerged.

Apparel: Socially awkward and publically embarrassing. Participants shared specific concerns over difficulty in obtaining apparel items that allowed for maintaining mobility and independence. A mother of children on the autism spectrum discussed the difficulty of finding garments with easy-to-fasten closures. Her children were unwilling to wear pants with a

traditional button and zipper closure as “they would have to use the bathroom at school and not be able to get themselves back in order,” causing social awkwardness and intensifying lack of independence. Similarly, another participant discussed her father-in-law’s inability to wear traditional pants due to his suprapubic catheter, a common medical device. To him, this device requires assistance to use the bathroom and imposes a high possibility of leakage in a public space, and therefore, he stopped traveling using public transportation. **Apparel: Source of discrimination.** The desire to accommodate sensory-related apparel issues can be interpreted as a gateway to avoiding social exclusion in some circumstances. The examples provided by a mother of sensory-sensitive preteens illustrated the frustration experienced by parents who are concerned that these sensory issues could interfere with their child’s life milestones and events, or make them a target of discrimination.

The results suggest that identified unmet apparel needs negatively impact the social lives of PLWD and their families, supporting the social model of disability. That is, medical disability creates social problems of PLWD and their unmet apparel needs exasperate social participation barriers for PLWD and hinder their ability to achieve the best possible quality of life. These results highlight the need for an inclusive apparel design approach to overcome the apparel-related barriers facing PLWD. Future research implications include additional interview samples to build on the apparel-need categories identified here and to further explore the market potential of inclusively designed clothing for apparel manufacturers, brands, and retailers.

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